

2009 Winter Camp: Insight into my Thoughts, Experiences and Recommendations I Would Make.

By Linlee Tram

The desire to journey far from the comforts of Aotearoa is a notion shared among many young kiwis. We are a lucky generation, travelling has virtually become a rite of passage. And as Chinese New Zealanders, we are additionally blessed with the chance to explore another country that is a part of our ancestry.

Together, with 22 other jetsetters of similar age and background, I embarked on this expedition. The following is an account of my thoughts and experiences over the two-week Guangzhou "camp". Further on, there is also a summary of the tour which makes up the remainder of the month long NZCA Winter Camp.

First Impressions

Arrival in Hong Kong and then subsequently Shenzhen, and Guangzhou presented a cacophony of thoughts. It was smoggy and dreary yet the cities were bustling with people. While crossing the border from Honk Kong to Shenzhen, the officials were prim and proper but we found ourselves bombarded by locals and quickly learnt to adopt the pushy Asian attitude. It was hot and humid; however, people gave us funny looks for wearing shorts. While the streets were dirty, we were very lucky and stayed in pleasant hotels. Such contrasts were my first impressions and its quite fair to say that this dichotomy continued throughout the entire trip.



The School

I really appreciated the school stay because it gave insight into parts of day-to-day Chinese life that I believe, cannot be experienced as an ordinary tourist. There was a sense of camaraderie between teachers and students, as well as within the student body that made the absence of hotel luxuries feel insignificant. As I expected, the time spent at the school provided us with plenty of learning opportunities. In addition to the formal lessons in Kung-fu, Mandarin and calligraphy, many skills and etiquettes were also acquired through interaction and observation.

For example, we quickly found that our fun-loving, joke-around Kiwi attitude was not appropriate during Kung Fu class. Even though I was injured and had to sit out, the impression that class should be taken very seriously emanated out to the sidelines loud and clear. Showing respect to our elders and superiors was imperative; we had to acknowledge Zhang Shi-fu (Master Zhang) whenever he walked past by putting our hands together into the Kung Fu equivalent of a salute.

Being immersed amongst locals meant that we were forced to improve our Chinese. Whether it was during sports matches, the traditional knot-tying session, or just walking around campus, trying to communicate in English to the students was never very successful beyond "Hello, how are you?" I went on to the trip with an advantage of moderate understanding and some speaking ability. For the first time in my life, I appreciated this. I felt incredibly useful being able to translate for fellow travelers over the duration of the trip.

The Hospital

Although this event spans only a short period, it is worthy of its own subheading. It was one of the most eye opening experiences of the entire trip. On day 5, shortly after unpacking into the school living quarters, I dislocated my knee during a friendly soccer match. Ice was nowhere to be found and there wasn't much the school medic could do so I was driven to the local hospital.

Boy, was it an experience! We were greeted by a nurse who wore a beauty pageant-like sash over her uniform but apart from that, there seemed to be no sense of order in the hospital. There was no obvious reception and all the doctors shared the same room – they just had separate desks. We basically just went up to one of them and asked him to take a look at my knee. It was shocking to find that he completely lacked the empathy we expect in NZ doctors, but nevertheless, he did his job and sent me off to x-ray.

Waiting for the x-ray films gave me a moment to calm down from the shock of the injury and we began to observe our surroundings a bit more. There was a lady who was carrying an infant in her arms as well as her own saline drip that was merely attached to a stick. No wheeled drip stand, only a stick. A while later, we saw this same lady carrying the infant, her drip on a stick, and now, the addition of a toddler on her back. There was also a man with a bandage wrapped around his forehead soaked in blood. While I found this all to be quite surreal and devastating at the same time, the rest of the patients in the waiting area seemed to be sitting there oblivious to their environment. Some of them were coughing and sneezing, some were just busy eating their hot noodle soup. It was about then, that we decided to ask for facemasks.

Eventually, the x-ray showed that I hadn't broken anything and I was wheeled off to get some Chinese medicine. My swollen knee received an application of brown paste and got strapped up in paper towels and fishnet bandage.

The whole experience left me with mixed emotions. I wasn't really negative or appalled by the low health care standards, but more just humbled by what I'd seen. People had it much harder than we do at home but they seem to plough through just the same or in fact, far better than we would. I was incredibly annoyed that my knee would now stop me from doing some of the activities on the trip. However, seeing that lady carrying two kids while on a drip taught me that, at the end of the day, I just had to deal with the situation. In saying that, I must mention immense admiration to all the friends who helped me while I was injured. Whether it was holding my bag, getting me a bowl of jook for breakfast, or carrying me up and down numerous flights of stairs, my gratitude extends so much further than the "Thank Yous" I have expressed.



The Villages

I loved the opportunity to see and compare the different villages that everybody's ancestors came from. Many have grown and become quite industrial while others remain agricultural. Regardless of this, there was always an amazing sense of warmth when we walked into old houses and talked to the

elders. It was remarkable to see that some villagers still maintained shrines with photographs of ancestors that some of us were directly descendant from. Sadly, I didn't get to visit my own ancestral village because our family didn't have enough information to track back. Despite this, I still felt a connection to fellow tripper's villages knowing that my own ancestors shared the same modest lifestyle back then.

Even though I have never experienced life in a Chinese village, making the trip back allows me to see how different it is to my life in New Zealand. Many people talk about how going back to the villages make them appreciate and understand their parent's values better. For me, the villages that I felt most affinity towards were always the really bare and basic ones. It was similar to the hospital situation in the sense that it makes you realize how much more luxurious our lives are compared to the villagers. Yet, I am convinced they feel the same level of fulfillment and joy.

The above has encompassed the first two weeks of the tour. Another two weeks of sight seeing followed. Personally, I found the "camp" part to be the most thought provoking and inspiring. However, touring North through Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing certainly also brought some memorable highlights. Below, is a quick rundown of these highlights and recommendations I'd give to future organizers or travelers.

Hangzhou is a really beautiful, picturesque city. Looking back, I've realized that having it as the first city after the Guangzhou camp was not only geographically convenient but also ideal to get everyone into tourist mode. Biking around Westlake was definitely the top attraction. (Once again, I have to credit one of the guys for letting me sit on the back of their bike as my knee was injured) I also enjoyed the shopping market on He Fang road. Like the rest of Hangzhou, the buildings were all stunning Chinese style and the streets were lit with red lanterns. Starting prices at this market were quite reasonable and you didn't have to haggle as much.

Xitang Water Town was a stop off on the drive between Hangzhou and Shanghai. It was another very picturesque attraction that we often compared with Venice. We traveled around on single oar hand propelled boats to visit the museum and at the restaurant that served local specialties. This included little fish deep-fried to a crisp, so crispy that you simply eat them whole.

The highlight of Shanghai for me was the tailors market. I would definitely recommend it for people who are after coats, suits and Chongsams. Custom garments are made within a matter of days and the prices are very good. With a large group I think we needed an hour on top of the two we had and that it was better to spend time there than shopping on Nanjing Road. I thought it was the best place to get good quality clothes at reasonable prices. Other interesting sights include the TV tower, the Shanghai history museum, and the Huang Po river night cruise.



Beijing. The Great Wall. For me, these two are virtually synonymous. Though we saw many other sights including the Temple of Heaven, Tiananmen Square, and the Forbidden City, the Great Wall was by far the most astounding. It was a tough climb, especially at below zero temperatures and with a sore knee but it was well

worth it. If there were one thing I could change, it would be to spend more time there. We were given two hours but I would have been happy to spend the good part of a day there. Aside from climbing, I would have loved to simply stop and take in the breath taking scenery. Even if it meant we did not get to have a sit down lunch like we did everyday, I would not have been fazed. Another one of my favorite places in Beijing was Hutong village and the rickshaw ride. Wang Fu Jing road is another must go destination with its street stalls selling weird foods such as starfish, scorpion, silk worms and delicious lamb kebabs.

All in all, the NZCA Winter Camp has been an amazing trip with a great group of great friends who ultimately, made it the journey of a lifetime. I knew it would be fun beforehand but looking back now, I see that it was the perfect first big overseas trip for me. Now that I have explored my roots and gained a greater understanding of my heritage, I have a far more grounded sense of identity. I am sure that in future years; this journey will serve as a cornerstone to the subsequent travel I embark on.